



GIORGI VACHNADZE 2024-02-10

PARASITES, SYMBIOTES AND DECOYS: REMEMBERING BAUDRILLARD'S CONTAMINATED DISCOURSE

PHILOFICTION BAUDRILLARD, FOUCAULT, OBJECT, POST-MODERN, POWER,
SIMULATION

first published in: <https://bluelabyrinths.com/2024/02/05/parasites-symbiotes-and-decoys-remembering-baudrillards-contaminated-discourse/?fbclid=IwAR2ekuRmrywKG7gjsO36oonGHwlbmV3DqUvOzEIVN2-GZnsFnEDvtaHD3ew>

The parasite serves as a useful simulacrum for post-modernism. Post-modernity engages us with a kind of *viral* discourse, which seeks to comprehend an object without subsuming it under a system of concepts; without, that is, deploying a *regime of truth* (Lorenzini, 2015) that

dominates and forces the object into a conceptual grinder. Instead, it does something much worse. It attempts to open up a line of *interactivity*, where the object acts as a host for the theorist or vice versa. A viral philosophical investigation is always parasitic on that which it investigates. It has no patience for objectivity or fairness; it only seeks to facilitate a transformation, possibly to the point of self-disappearance. Such *mutual contamination* is what the current paper attempts to describe in the process of entangling and disentangling the discursive tail-fibers of Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault. The relationship between the two parasites deserves a closer look. It is not a simple and straightforward relation of competitive domination, but a much more complex – symbiotic – relation of power.

It is no straightforward task to speak of differences and similarities between the Foucauldian and the Baudrillardian approach. Foucault's take is much more meticulous, his entire oeuvre is academic in the strictest sense of the word [1]. Baudrillard chooses to remain at the surface, quite lax; especially in his later work. We cannot brush this off as a simple differentiation of styles or a further distinction of relevance/irrelevance, depth/superficiality. Both Foucault and Baudrillard are professional parasites, which means they produce perfect simulations that trick the immune systems of the very objects, discourses, practices and institutions they seek to "criticize" and whose defenses they seek to bypass. They are excellent hosts and therefore they are both the guest and the host; simulations of power, powers of simulation; the more one reads and compares them, the more they refract each other as well as the systems of objects (Baudrillard, 2020), statements, strategies, enunciative modalities, functions [2], and so on (Foucault, 2013), which they infect/effect/affect and become infected/effected/affected by. It is in this sense not a *simple* differentiation of styles, but a *very important* difference of styles. It is not a full-blooded difference, but a loose and porous one. The difference can be characterized as a *family resemblance* (Wittgenstein, 2010) of heterogenous elements which acts as a trace; as evidence and only a stuttering witness of the fact that each decided to enter a slightly different discursive domain, in a slightly different way. It is not a "big" difference, but a scaled difference that must permeate any attempt at a comparative analysis.

Let us take a moment to do an actual Baudrillardian reading of Foucault using the *Forget Foucault* (2007) text as our point of departure. Rex Butler argues that the later Foucault is in fact "*Baudrillardian*" (2022) through and through, offering the possibility for a fruitful reconciliatory dialogue between the two thinkers. Needless to say, despite the agonistic tone of the title of Baudrillard's book on Foucault, not only is the text a "back-handed insult," it serves also as a covert gateway to Baudrillard's wider repertoire. Before embarking upon our Foucauldian amnesia, let us quote the preface from Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: "*Things must be pushed to the limit, where quite naturally they collapse and are inverted*" (Baudrillard, 2017). Two notions resonate already and quite distinctly with Foucault; the idea of *reversibility* in the sense of reversing relations of power and the concept of *the limit* as a space of resistance. Limit-experiences enable the subject, temporarily and partially, to step outside her own epistemic formation in order to catch a surveyable glimpse of the machinations of power on an epochal scale. This in turn reveals the contingency of the very institutions and those legitimating discourses, which support them and which the subject finds constraining (Foucault, 1990, 2005, 2013 & 2020). This is the meaning of Genealogy.

The infamous *repressive hypothesis* (Foucault, 1990) would serve as a good example: Both

Baudrillard and Foucault agree that sexual liberation, much more than a double-edged sword, seems to rely on the very mechanisms it sought to liberate itself from, while (and thereby) simultaneously being a simulation or a false problematization on its own. In his later work on pastoral governance and Christian technologies of the self, Foucault (2023) shows how sexuality has, in many ways, *always been productive* rather than something that was “liberated” after centuries of censorship and prohibitions. Admittedly, sex has never been divorced from fear and anxiety, but neither is it today, not really. The point being, there was in one way or another, always an injunction; a more or less explicit (pun intended) command to speak and to speak endlessly of one's sexual desires. The Foucauldian solution is to seek alternative forms of sexual self-expression, which dissent from commodified forms of narcissistic self-formation under capitalism. Analogously, Baudrillard (among other strategies) seeks to deconstruct the “functional” (mostly female) body as the “*narcissistic cult object or element of social ritual and tactics* [3]” (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 151).

Baudrillard's (2017) *The Consumer Society* can be read in tandem and made to operate as an “upgrade” to Foucault's historical and biopolitical multi-volume analyses of power and sexuality. At the same time, Foucault goes to such depths and extremes in attempting to pin down the genealogy of Neo-liberalism that Baudrillard seems barely able to keep up. Where Foucault shows how the body is a medico-legal artifact constructed through multiple relations of power i.e., the medical gaze, the doctor's examination (Foucault, 2002) or simply as an object of training and (self) discipline (Foucault, 2020), Baudrillard reveals the very same object(s)-construction as an entity invested with unconscious mythical and religious components through media, technology and advertisement. Where Christianity attempted to make the body disappear through multiple techniques of self-formation, consumerism places the divine square within the material element by glorifying the body. A new regime is thereby enacted, where salvation can only be achieved through the obscene and narcissistic fetishization of the body-object. A “perfect” and often calculable, if not algorithmic, materialization of one's identity. The body disappears again, but this time through the abstract operations of codes. The coded body thus activates a new technology of governance through the convergence of disciplinary apparatuses (gyms, training regimes, cosmetic routines) with marketing techniques (social media, photoshopped faces, oversexualized bodies placed within hyperfunctional spaces). The market deploys thereby a novel regime of obedience and docility masked as efficiency and productivity.

Issues of identity, subjectivity and the self are intensely intertwined with problems in epistemology [3]. Foucault was a psychologist by training and Baudrillard's official academic affiliation was sociology. Both thinkers deliberately, many would say successfully, sought to transgress the methodological boundaries of their respective disciplines [4]. The pinnacle, one could say, or the most complex field of simulacra, which helped them achieve this, is the *Will to Knowledge*; a term mentioned by Baudrillard here and there, which was borrowed from Foucault and originally inspired by Nietzsche. *The Will to Know* is what drives the subject's curiosity, moreover it is the pre-condition of subjectivity; the self is only an effect of its operations (Foucault, 2014). Both knowledge (*connaissance*) and the self; both the subject and the object, are produced through operations of power as will to knowledge (*savoir*). “...*the Will to Know composes illusions, fabricates lies, accumulates errors, and is deployed in a space of fiction where the truth itself is only an effect*” (Foucault, 2014). What we see here, in a way, is

the theory of the simulacrum deployed within science. In this sense, the *hyper-functional* (Baudrillard, 2020), one could claim, is not limited to technology, advertisement, gadgets or gizmos; what many would term as the “mere” surface-effects of otherwise “real scientific rationality”. To the contrary. The problem lies at the very root of scientific *enterprise*, because it is *in fact* an enterprise. This is where Foucault could in turn offer an “upgrade” to Baudrillard by digging deeper into core epistemological questions of scientific method.

Foucault was also trained as a phenomenologist; a movement that became trendy with existentialist circles in late 20th century France, mostly through Sartre's popularization of the works of Husserl and Heidegger. Unlike post-structuralist interpretations of the subject-object dichotomy; a fleeting construct made possible only through dispersed discursive practices [5], phenomenology sought to ground reality directly in subjectivity. To quote Husserl, “...*what is primary in itself is subjectivity, understood as that which naively pre-gives (vorgibt) the being of the world and then rationalizes or (what is the same thing) objectifies it*” (1970), and earlier on the same page of the *Crisis*: “*the subjectivity which ultimately brings about all world-validity, with its content and in all its prescientific and scientific modes, and into the “what” and the “how” of the rational accomplishments—can make objective truth comprehensible and arrive at the ultimate ontic meaning of the world*” (Husserl, 1970, p. 69). Just like Sartre (2004) [6] and the later Merleau-Ponty (Schmidt, 1985), Foucault abandoned the theory of the subject. One of the decisive turning points in Foucault's work was breaking away from phenomenology, which played an important role in his formulation of a history without a subject (Foucault, 2005, p. 422). A similar anti-humanism (in the epistemological, not the ethical sense) pervades Baudrillard's work as well: *The disappearance of the subject*.

With Baudrillard, seduction is the post-phenomenological exposition of the way in which the subject vanishes by being lured into the object. Much more so than Foucault's idea of the disappearance of man, the Baudrillardian fatal desubjectification is directly tied to the logic of capital. The ecstasy of consumption, gambling, pornography and video games, where we “lose ourselves” literally. Certainly, there is no problem in saying that the subject is here also dispersed through discourse or constituted through the institutional power-matrix, but according to Baudrillard, this is no longer necessary and perhaps too verbose. Instead, we are given a much simpler schematism, a handbook of sorts for how to navigate through consumer culture. Not in order to survive of course, but to enjoy the imminence of death i.e., to become engulfed by the object. Foucault explains how the subject is an illusion that may become decentered at any moment, furthermore, he offers us an entire history of the ways in which individuals dismantled and re-arranged themselves for various purposes. Baudrillard offers something much less and yet something much more in its simplicity; inspired by Lefebvre's (2014) analysis of everyday life, he says something like, “Look. There it goes! Right there. And there it goes again! Every time you do *this* and *this* or *that*, you die, you vanish; and it's beautiful. Do it right.” Or more literally: “*There is an art of disappearing, a way of modulating it and making it into a state of grace. This is what I'm trying to master in theory*” (Baudrillard, J., & Lotringer, S., 1987). What Baudrillard does, or can do, for Foucault, is incredibly Wittgensteinian, if not Stoic. Baudrillard shows (or *shews*) how power operates at the level of ordinary language, everyday experiences, within the (apparently) simple structures of the experiential lifeworld, without recourse to technical academic jargon. Why not get biblical? Foucault crucified himself on the cross of intensely complicated theory to show how

history and experience are a sham, so that we can enjoy the Baudrillardian bliss of glossy coffee-table-magazine existentialism, while maintaining all the same (shaky) convictions about the current order of things. "Foucault died for our *sims*".

Baudrillard's discourse can itself be described as *potlatch*. An obscene ecstatic ritual exhibiting pure excess and self-effacement. The question for us now is – what happened? Or what continues to happen as the *System of Objects* begins to confront the *System of Statements*, as *The Order of Things* meets *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, but most importantly: What happened when the *History of Sexuality* encountered *Forget Foucault*? The first two questions merit a separate study, the third one we will have to try and answer. According to Lotringer (2007), Baudrillard was a devout Foucauldian until the moment he surpassed his master, that is, up until *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. By the time *Forget Foucault* was finished the viral simulacrum had absorbed its host – genealogy – entirely, redeploying itself as a completely new symbiote. It wasn't victory that Baudrillard was anticipating with his challenge to Foucault, it was the battle itself. A parasite does not attack its host, quite the opposite; the parasite might feign an attack in order to provoke the adversary, the parasite *wants to be attacked*, to be eaten, to be vanquished by being assimilated, that is the very condition of its victory. Its entry-point.

"Foucault's discourse is a mirror of the powers it describes," says Baudrillard (2007) in the very first pages of *Forget Foucault* after, what seemed at least, as a page-long elegy in praise of the master. Foucault's writing is first and foremost *seductive* in the Baudrillardian sense. It operates as a discourse of power itself. But the ingeniousness of Foucauldian discourse is the double seduction, the merging of two types of *perfection*; beautiful prose with rigorous analyticity. It combines the dazzling power of the crystalline, like the hypnotizing transparency of the early Wittgenstein (2021) [7], with the poetry of *Philosophical Investigations* (2010) or the aphoristic style in *Culture and Value* (1998). And very much like Wittgenstein, Foucault (as Baudrillard notes) is not concerned with saying something truthful. What we encounter instead is a meticulous description of the conditions of possibility for the deployment of binary functions – the True (1) and the False (0). When it comes to the *savoir* of discourse, as opposed to *connaissance*, the mythical is just as useful as the so-called "factual". But this perfection, Baudrillard explains, is due to the fact that Foucault is inaugurating a death, a point of maximal expansion, a limit that circumscribes the demise of his own discourse and perhaps his own death as a thinker, possibly along with the death of a particular *episteme* – the death of the age of finitude?

Unfortunately, after the first generalized foreshadowing of how one might begin to start forgetting Foucault, Baudrillard continues to elaborate on the contents of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* in short paraphrases, summaries and arguably utterly banal and unoriginal reformulations of its main theses. He has entered the host, the work is now contaminated with the simulacrum; inconsequential criticisms here and there, but nothing too devastating. Even the equal sign drawn between repression and production, in terms of the power-mechanisms orchestrating the false liberation of sexuality is really another cheap strawman operation. The same goes for the alleged substitution of power with seduction or the age-old, worn-out critique: "If power is everywhere, then it's also nowhere! And where does resistance come from anyway?" It really seems that Baudrillard has offered nothing

more than a useful summary of all the failed objections leveled against Foucault. And as one keeps on reading, it never gets better. Nothing substantial is said. There is no culmination, no final blow, no subversion. What's the point?

Forget Foucault seems to be nothing more than a regurgitation of an otherwise excellent meal, which just happened to be ill-digested by a ruined palette. Is this Baudrillard's provincialism? His "superficiality?" Let us not forget that Baudrillard's interest in writing came nowhere near to Foucault's passion for letters. Baudrillard enjoyed a rich and diverse life full of various activities outside of academia. A jack of all trades, he only wrote when he felt like it, while Foucault made sure he himself always felt like writing, even at the cost of violent self-mutilation. As difficult as it is to admit, symbolic reversals will never be able to challenge the complex armament of Foucauldian strategies for resistance. They are simply not the same.

But the question can be stated differently. As in combat, so in theory, it isn't always the technical, nor the strongest fighter that gets the belt. It is often the sloppy shit-talker; the slugger that goes "all-in" like a gambler – yes, potlatch... again. From a purely academic point of view, *Forget Foucault* is a cheap shot, a stab in the dark by a freeloader that got to score on pure chance and now his name is alongside the boys in the big leagues. But that just is the strategy of symbolic exchange (and death). Baudrillard risked his own death as a writer by creating a text such as this. He could have been excommunicated from all the prestigious intellectual circles (before leaving voluntarily) and lose what little readership he had accumulated up to that point. But he didn't. The success of this particular move in the language-game of theory proved immensely successful. And the result speaks for itself.

If one wants to read Baudrillard, one should *not* read *Forget Foucault*, but if one has no interest at all in Baudrillard, then one should read *Forget Foucault*, and then one *will* begin to care about Baudrillard. Contrary to our expectations, *Forget Foucault* turned out to be an utter disappointment. At the same time, everything that went into the preparation to engage with the text, was on the other hand illuminating and inspirational. Everything *around* the text; its historical milieu, the core literature that went into its making and a lot of what was published posthumously, remain as fascinating as can be. The essay was made visible at the right place and at the right time. But the seduction of *Forget Foucault* lies precisely and solely in its strategic deployment. Its power is only in its placement. It is utterly devoid of all content. Why *would* Foucault respond to it? It is a pure decoy. Thus provoked, he didn't attack. Foucault saw exactly what was happening. But the best he could do was refuse to act as a catalyst for what was about to come. Beaten at his own game by someone who was more Foucauldian than himself, someone who truly went beyond power by deactivating it through a nifty little "hack." *Forget Foucault* fulfills one simple function: It makes one want to read Baudrillard... That is all. There is nothing more. But when one begins to read Baudrillard one realizes that Baudrillard was in fact always worth reading. You see the depth, the scope, the relevance, the ornament and the poetry of his oeuvre. The only regret that haunts you from that point onward, is the pettiness of what made you want to read him, your own pettiness and the *giddiness* induced by that title, which made you waste your precious time reading a monumental piece of trash, like *Forget Foucault*.

References

- Baudrillard, J. (2007). *Forget Foucault*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Baudrillard, J. (2017). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Revised). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Baudrillard, J. (2020). *The System of Objects*. London: Verso.
- Baudrillard, J. & Grant I. H. (2017). *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Revised). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Baudrillard, J., & Lotringer, S. (1987). *Forget Baudrillard: An Interview with Sylvère Lotringer*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Butler, R. (2022). Foucault After Baudrillard. *Continental Thought and Theory*, 3(4), 95-115.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume I*. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (2002). *The Birth of the Clinic*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (2013). *Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (2005). *The Order of Things*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (2020). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (2023). *Confessions of the Flesh*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. Defert, D. Burchell G. & Collège de France (2014). *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the College de France 1970-1971 and Oedipal Knowledge* (First Picador). London: Picador.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (2014). *Critique of Everyday Life: The One-Volume Edition*. London: Verso.
- Lorenzini, D. (2015). What is a "Regime of Truth"? *Le Foucauldien*, 1(1).
- Lotringer, S. (2007). Exterminating Angel: Introduction to Forget Foucault. *Forget Foucault*, 7-26.
- Schmidt, J. (1985). Conclusion: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism. *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, 155-167.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2004). *The Transcendence of the Ego: A Sketch for a Phenomenological Description*. London: Routledge.
- Spinoza, B. (2018). *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Wittgenstein, L. (1998). *Culture and Value: Revised Edition*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2010). *Philosophical Investigations* (4th ed.). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2021). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Anthem Press.

[1] With the exception of the subject matter.

[2] Baudrillard's notion of *function* and *functionality*, of *the hyper-functional*, *the dysfunctional* and so forth as compared to Foucault's idea of the *statement* as a kind of *network of functions* (like the *system of objects* with Baudrillard) which maintains a discursive formation, etc. merits a separate and dedicated study all on its own.

[3] *The subject's relation to truth* – one of the central themes in Foucault's work.

[4] “*The only 'sociological' work I can claim is my effort to put an end to the social, to the concept of the social*” – a quote from one of Baudrillard's (2007, p. 85) interviews with Sylvère Lotringer.

[5] The subject as an *effect* of discourse.

[6] In particular, the very last concluding remarks in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (2004).

[7] In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (2021).

Giorgi Vachnadze is a philosopher specializing in Foucault and Wittgenstein studies. He graduated with a Master's Degree from the University of Louvain. Former editor and peer-reviewer for the Graduate Student Journal of philosophy “The Apricot” and guest speaker at an addiction and rehabilitation centre in Tbilisi (Georgia), he now teaches English and takes part in some of the activities of the Lawn Chair Philosophy Foundation, working in parallel on various topics in Media Archaeology, Game Studies, American Pragmatism, Educational Policy and the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard.

← PREVIOUS NEXT →

META

CONTACT

FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX

IMPRESSUM

DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

CATEGORIES

TAGS

AUTHORS

ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

FACEBOOK

INSTAGRAM

TWITTER